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ABSTRACT

At-risk students in New York City schools display one or more of a broad range of characteristics associated with a high probability of academic failure. School Based Management/Shared Decision-Making (SBM/SDM) gives school professionals and parents the ability to choose among available strategies for reducing risk by implementing those strategies that most closely target their students' needs. Poor and minority students are at the greatest risk of failure because of a gap between home and school. This gap is the result of differences in the expectations parents and teachers have of students, and between the social and language skills required of students at home and at school. When schools represent an alien culture to students and fail to represent parental interests, students disengage from the school culture and the socioeconomic universe it represents. The following traditional compensatory education approaches are not effective in educating at-risk students: (1) retention; (2) pullout programs; and (3) in-class aides. The following strategies are more promising: (1) reducing class size; (2) early intervention; (3) cohesive social unit; (4) comprehensive effort; (5) intensive intervention; (6) bilingual instructional services; (7) culturally sensitive programs; (8) built-in flexibility; (9) active teaching; (10) engaged learning; (11) cooperative learning; and (12) community involvement. A list of 44 references and a list of three resources for educators are appended. (FMW)

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RESEARCH BRIEF #3
An O.R.E.A. Bulletin Linking Research with Educational Practice

BEYOND REMEDIATION: SCHOOL-BASED STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING EDUCATIONAL RISK

The publication, in 1983, of *A Nation at Risk* planted the idea of risk at the center of educational discussion and debate. Before long, the notion was transferred from our society to our students. While the 1983 report drew attention primarily to the decline in test scores and educational standards, the focus soon turned to issues of curriculum, teacher education, the locus of educational decision-making, and most recently, to the challenges of teaching students who are at risk of educational failure. Today, more than 4.5 million American students are considered to be "at risk" (***Research for Better Schools Project Brief***), and the literature on their status and educational treatment is voluminous.

This ***Research Brief*** summarizes the more prominent or promising approaches represented in the literature, linking them whenever possible to concrete educational practice at the school level. It highlights opportunities for reducing educational risk that can be brought about through School-Based Management/Shared Decision-Making (SBM/SDM).

Students termed "at risk" in the 1980's resemble the group identified, in the 1960's, as "disadvantaged." Some educators now consider that term biased, because it places responsibility for the student's educational status on the family or the child, rather than on the school or other institutions. From this perspective, the term "at risk" appears to be more neutral, and yet it begs the question: At risk of what?

All children can learn, including those at risk of school failure, and we know a great deal about how to teach them.

A certain proportion of our students are not going to gain a firm grasp of basic skills; will not advance in school as far as they might; will drop out before graduating; will not pursue post-secondary schooling; will be unable to find employment; will be unable to form lasting families and support them; will enter crime and drug subcultures. All of these students are in some sense "at risk," but each of these problems calls for a different solution (Ralph 1989), and some of them fall well beyond the bounds of the school's traditional role or authority.

Who Is At Risk?

As a category, "at risk" has come to refer to a broad spectrum of student characteristics, all associated with a high probability of not achieving success in school. (See Profile of At-Risk Students.) The ***Research for Better Schools Project Brief*** offers this characterization:

> As students, they are generally low achievers. They also differ from their more successful peers in development of self-esteem, task performance, cultural aspirations, and life experiences. It is estimated that ⅔ of these students are from families at the poverty level and that many are Black and Hispanic. Many are victims of family trauma or physical, emotional, alcohol, or drug abuse (cited in ***Sharing Success***, Volume 1, No. 2, Spring 1989).

Because so many New York City students exhibit one or more of these characteristics, "at risk" youth confront our educators with complex challenges. At the

UD 027 728

same time, our schools present a range of difficulties to these students. Over time, the introduction of SBM/SDM into our schools will give school professionals and parents the opportunity to choose among available strategies for reducing risk, putting into practice those that most closely target their students' needs.

Research by New York's State Education Department has persuasively linked economic and educational deprivation, showing that as the concentration of poverty in a school building increases, the more likely it is that the building will have a higher than normal dropout rate (The SED, ***Learning in New York***, February 1987).

Today, poverty as a devastating force in children's lives is receiving greater recognition from politicians and educators alike. Former U.S. Commissioner of Education Harold Howe II recently wrote, "The real villain in the lives of children is poverty, and it is progressively more pervasive. In 1969 one in seven children was poor; today it is one in five; by the year 2000 it will be one in four . . . . It is a prime cause of the social symptoms that worry us most about our children — the use of drugs, leaving school, irresponsible sex, and delinquency." (***Harvard Education Letter***, Jan/Feb 1990, p. 2).

Why are poor and minority students at greater risk? Despite decades of speculation, researchers have not yet reached consensus on this critical question. Increasingly, educators are focusing on psychosocial issues, specifically the interaction between students and schools, noting that for poor and minority students, there is often a vast, debilitating gap between home and school.

Bridging The Experience Gap

Schools, the people who work in them, and the larger culture they represent may be unfamiliar and—in many cases—unwelcoming to at-risk students and their families. As New York City educator Luther Seabrook has written in a profile of an at-risk student, "Our child has never experienced the culture we assume in our tests and texts. Our child lives in a separate nation — what we call the underclass" (Seabrook 1989:2).

Today's teacher, in Seabrook's view, must go "way beyond remediation to meet our child's needs. That educator has to understand and use the skills and interests of every child in the classroom and the school to give them the ability to acquire skills which society values. That educator has to teach a whole new culture — not just a history and a context, but different ways of thinking, ways of seeing, ways of talking, ways of living and surviving" (Seabrook 1989:3).

Indeed, several educators have recently concluded that the social, linguistic, and experiential gap between home and school is the major obstacle faced by these students, and that bridging it is educators' most pressing challenge (Comer 1988; Natriello et al. 1986; Cummins 1896; Maeroff 1988). They assert that classroom interventions alone cannot close the gap, and that to succeed, initiatives must do no less than redesign the delivery of educational services, empowering teachers, parents and community members and reflecting the specific needs of their children. In New York City, School-Based Management/Shared Decision-Making is moving the school system in this direction. (See Trendlines NYC).

Social Misalignment

In "Educating Poor Minority Children," James P. Comer argues persuasively that when parents and teachers have radically different expectations of children, the children are not likely to

TRENDLINES USA

A PROFILE OF AT-RISK STUDENTS

A recent analysis of the nationally representative High School and Beyond data compared sophomores who dropped out of school with those who persevered (Ekstrom et al. 1986). Those who dropped out were more likely to:

- come from low socio-economic families;
- come from families where English was not the home language;
- come from homes with fewer supports for educational achievement (lower levels of parental education, less frequent parental monitoring of a child's education, fewer study aids, etc.);
- be truant;
- work at jobs more hours per week and find their jobs more enjoyable and important than school;
- have disciplinary problems.

They were also less likely to be popular with classmates, report interest in school, spend time on homework, or get good grades or test scores.

achieve at the level of their ability. The psychosocial development of most poor, minority children does not mesh with the mainstream culture encountered at school. He also speaks of "social misalignment," noting that poor minority children are unlikely to have learned the kinds of social and linguistic skills that are valued in school.

In his work in several minority schools, Comer found that the key to academic achievement was bridging the gap between home and school by fostering positive interaction between parents and school staff. To that end, Comer's team designed a program to overcome the staff's resistance to change, offer a working understanding of child development, and give them concrete ideas for improving relations with parents.

Far-reaching changes in a school's organization and governance were required to create these changes. Comer reports that the intervention programs his group created in New Haven produced significant academic gains, and have been successfully implemented in more than 50 schools around the nation.

When Students Tune Out...

The experience gap creates a vicious cycle: the wider the gap, the greater the risk of educational distress and failure. Snowballing failure creates more distance, more disengagement from the narrow cultural and moral world of school and the socio-economic universe it represents. Many educators believe that this detachment virtually guarantees failure:

> Of course, disengaged students may get by in school by making a token effort. That is, they can tune out, complete some of the work with minimal concentration, and even cheat. But such behavior will yield only short-term knowledge retention, which is unlikely to be applied or transferred beyond a few school tests. Students simply cannot meet the proper cognitive demands of secondary education through passive listening and reading (Newmann 1989:34).

The literature suggests that as long as schools represent an alien and inaccessible culture, and as long as schools make few efforts to represent parental interests — and face the conflicts which will inevitably arise — they are unlikely to engage large groups of at-risk students. And as long as policymakers raise achievement standards without giving school professionals the resources, staff development, and incentives to meet them, they are unlikely to engage alienated teachers (Firestone 1989).

TRENDLINES NYC

SBM/SDM: A UNIFIED APPROACH TO REDUCING RISK

The introduction of School-Based Management/Shared-Decision Making (SBM/SDM) into New York City's public schools reflects the growing consensus that to promote achievement and reduce educational risk, we need a "unified, equitable, unfragmented approach" (Joy Dryfoos, ***The Harvard Education Letter***, p.2).

SBM/SDM is founded on the belief that all children have great potential, but they are all different. To reach their potential, they need educational programs that address their specific needs. Within this framework, all children who are not receiving the help they need to fulfill their potential may be considered "at risk" — whether they are students with handicapping conditions, limited English proficiency, or special talents.

SBM/SDM rests on the conviction that programs for these students are part of the core services that every school must provide, and their funding should be part of a school's basic budget. In this context, local decision-makers address the needs of ***all*** of their students, including those considered to be "at risk" of educational failure, by chanelling the school's resources to those programs considered most likely to promote achievement in their particular setting.

In ***Allies in Educational Reform***, Jerome Rosow and Robert Zager provide an example, from Dade County, of how SBM/SDM can produce "single-school innovation" aimed at reducing risk:

> Drew [Elementary School], a predominantly black inner-city school, established tutoring sessions for grades 1-6 every Saturday morning from 9:00 to 12:00. The program is strictly voluntary and is intended to provide children with additional help in basic skills such as mathematics, reading, and writing. Regular teachers are used in the program and paid for their extra work. (p. 159)

This successful program was eventually replicated in 67 schools throughout the county.

The New York City public schools are now laying the groundwork for SBM/SDM, with a view toward introducing it into some schools in September 1990, based on their willingness and readiness to participate.

What Schools Can Do

Young people who leave school without sound basic skills are surely at risk in a labor market which offers few opportunities for poorly skilled and credentialed youth. New York City lost 62,000 blue-collar jobs between 1979 and 1987 — one out of seven of all jobs existing in 1979 (***New York Times***, 74). A recent Mayoral Commission on Black New York Report estimated that 124,000 dropouts compete for 26,000 jobs which require less than a high school diploma.

The need for more schooling places a greater burden upon educators to provide students — including at-risk youth — with the best possible education. But it is not always clear what that "best education" might be.

Some investigators question whether we have done enough basic research on at-risk students to allow more than educated guesses about how best to help them. (See "Asking Basic Questions.") But a significant body of research takes a more pragmatic, "spread-the-word" approach. It insists that all children can learn, including those at risk of school failure, and that we know a great deal about how to teach them. It points out that many teachers, through their own efforts and creativity, have developed effective classroom strategies.

This more pragmatic approach lays stress on rooting out strategies that don't work, no matter how established they may be in a school district's curriculum or funding structure; it calls for an all-out effort to identify effective interventions, analyze their successful features, and replicate them.

ASKING BASIC QUESTIONS

The emphasis on risk is, by definition, an optimistic stance. It assumes that while danger lurks, there is still time to avoid it, and that rescue is possible. Determined to effect that rescue, many educators are willing to accept the general definition of an "at-risk" student as one who is in danger of leaving school without an adequate level of skills — with a diploma or without — and proceed from there. (See, for example, Slavin and Madden 1989.)

Other researchers argue that we do not yet know how to effect a rescue, and that we must continue to address fundamental issues. They argue that we do not yet have the information we need to plan, create, or replicate effective programs for disadvantaged children. They argue that evaluations of existing programs are severely flawed, and do not provide the data needed to make reasonable decisions about program replication. Larry Cuban raises additional issues when he writes: "We know the necessary parts of an effective school, but we lack the know-how to put them together in just the right order." (1989, p. 30).

"Do we know whom to help?" John Ralph asks in the title of his recent article, asserting that policy makers have yet to define the at-risk population, or their behaviors. Basic questions remain unanswered: Who are disadvantaged youth? Do we identify them on the basis of their behaviors, or their socioeconomic and linguistic characteristics? What shapes their educational opportunities? Why are some motivated to persevere and perform well, while others drop out?

These arguments reflect the fact that central decision-makers are severely handicapped when they try to plan specific instructional programs for a large, diverse student population. In a large school system, at-risk students at one school may differ markedly from those in another setting. Indeed, the very definition of risk may differ from one community to another. The most basic questions — who is at risk? how can we motivate them? how can we help them? — must therefore be asked, and answered, at the school level.

Traditional Approaches

Generally speaking, researchers agree that traditional instructional strategies have failed to meet the long-term needs of at-risk students because they are relatively unsuccessful in engaging students or bridging the home/school gap. As John Ralph recently wrote:

> The data on compensatory education have been remarkably consistent over the last 20 years. Compensatory education programs have a modest, positive effect on school achievement, which is mostly observable in the early grades, is strongest in mathematics, and ***does not endure once program services are ended*** (1989, p. 396. Emphasis added).

Christopher Jencks argues that educators who find present compensatory strategies worthwhile have lowered their expectations to match their modest and short-lived benefits (cited in Ralph, p. 396).

Most studies of programs for at-risk students conclude that today's most common approaches to teaching at-risk students are often ineffective. These approaches include:

Retention: Many urban school districts now retain one in five students in each elementary grade

(Gottfredson 1988). Researchers are now reporting few long-term benefits of retention, even when remediation is provided (Shepard and Smith 1985, Hammack 1989).

Pullout programs: Pulling students out of the classroom for remedial work remains the most frequent intervention under Chapter 1 (Birman et al. 1987). However, pullout programs have come under increasing criticism in recent years by educators who charge that they are poorly integrated with regular classroom instruction, disrupt regular instruction, and lead to labeling.

In-class aides: Disenchanted with pullout programs, many school districts have introduced in-class models, with aides working right in the regular classroom. According to Slavin and Madden, "Both pullouts and in-class models are probably too limited a change in instructional strategy to make much of a difference" (Madden and Slavin 1989, p. 5; see also Archambault 1989).

More Promising Strategies

While the literature identifies a broad range of strategies that appear to benefit at-risk students, there is some consensus on the characteristics of effective programs. The common threads are clearly: 1) the intention to depart from or move beyond conventional instructional approaches; 2) an emphasis on prevention; 3) a vigorous effort to ***engage*** students (Newmann 1989); and 4) infusing the principle of teacher/parent ownership into every aspect of the educational process.

Basic to all of these strategies is a commitment to give teachers and administrators the support they need to make significant changes at the school level. School professionals cannot be expected to assume new responsibilities, or take new instructional approaches, without a variety of resources, ranging from formal staff development sessions and demonstrations, to informal advice as questions arise.

Few children benefit from smaller classes if inexperienced or inflexible teachers continue to use the same instructional methods that they used in larger classes.

Reducing class size: Some researchers find that reducing class size does not produce substantial benefits until class size approaches one (Slavin 1988). And in fact, there is no evidence that smaller classes in all grades will, in and of themselves, promote achievement. But the literature confirms that student/adult ratio is a key factor, and that a 15:1 ratio or better through grade 3 may indeed help children to sustain short-term gains, so that they can cope with, and profit from, later learning situations where conditions are less favorable (Sava 1985). Many school districts, including New York City, have found that shrinking class size is not sufficient by itself to strengthen achievement (Guttenberg et al. 1987). Rather, teachers need training in techniques that take advantage of the improved teacher/student ratio, and ongoing supervision to ensure that these techniques are applied day-to-day in the classroom. Few children benefit from smaller classes if inexperienced or inflexible teachers continue to use the same instructional methods that they used in larger classes.

Early intervention: Research underscores the essential role of early identification and treatment of children who are at risk of school failure (Guttenberg et al. 1987). Seldom do empirical research evidence and common sense agree so completely as they do on this issue. New York City's early childhood initiatives, including Project Child and Project Giant Step, appear to have a particularly strong impact on limited English proficient students.

Research suggests that in the long term, early childhood programs are a cost-effective approach to serving at-risk children. The Children's Defense Fund estimates that every $1 spent on poor children for quality early childhood programs like Head Start generates $4.75 in long-term savings because of the resulting lower costs in special education, public assistance, and crime intervention efforts. The House Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families estimates even higher savings: $6 for every $1 spent.

In New York State, the Primary Mental Health Program and Early Prevention of School Failure are Sharing Success programs targeting pre-schoolers and children in the early years of elementary school. In many cases, intervention must begin even earlier — with improved maternal health and monitoring during pregnancy. This is beyond the scope of the schools; however,

schools can offer more health-related services to young parents and their children, such as those now offered to student-parents at the various New York City sites of Project LYFE (Office of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment 1987).

Cohesive social unit: Successful programs tend to enroll no more than a few hundred students, and sometimes as few as 50 (Cuban 1989). They may operate in the context of a larger school, but they combat anonymity and alienation by giving students a smaller, more cohesive social unit, modelled on a community. Giving the program a particular mission or identity tends to strengthen students' identification with the program, and their sense of belonging. In New York City, a "house" program, organized in many high schools to nurture ninth-grade students, has been well received by both students and staff. Evaluations of high school bilingual programs indicate that these often provide a sense of community as well.

Comprehensive effort: Successful strategies take shape as full-scale programs: planning is rigorous and reflects students' specific needs; instructional approaches are systematic and well documented; curricular materials are complete and detailed; staff training is relevant and ongoing (Slavin and Madden 1989).

Intensive interventions: Effective preventive or remedial programs allow for one-to-one tutoring, or individually adapted computer-assisted instruction. Even small-group instruction is not intensive enough to help students "catch up" if they have been held back more than once, or have had interrupted or incomplete schooling in another country.

Bilingual instructional services: For students likely to make slow academic progress because of their limited familiarity with English, bilingual subject-area instruction and English as a second language (E.S.L.) classes are important (and are court-mandated in New York City). "Sheltered English" programs or E.S.L. taught through the content areas may also help these students continue successfully in English-language classrooms. Linguistically appropriate and culturally sensitive programs help retain minority-language students by allowing them to develop content knowledge while they are acquiring English skills in supportive settings (Garcia 1988; Hakuta and Gould 1987).

Culturally sensitive programs: Programs which support students' emotional growth and self-concept by reflecting, valuing and incorporating their cultural heritage may be especially helpful in encouraging the school performance of language-minority and African-American children (Garcia 1988; Johnson and Johnson 1978, Vogt et al. 1987).

Built-in flexibility: Successful programs do not take a cookie-cutter approach to education. They give professionals and parents the flexibility to develop local solutions for local problems. Curricula and classrooms are flexible, based on students' changing needs. Mixed ability and multi-age groupings appear to boost motivation and promote learning. Hammack (1989) and Smith and Shepard (1987) urge de-emphasis of the academic timetable, including age/achievement standards. Others find value in a more flexible use of the school year (with learning taking place during summer recess; Heyns 1978), and the school day (with some longer periods and some shorter ones).

Active teaching: Research on teacher effectiveness ties the pedagogic approach known as direct instruction or active teaching to gains in reading and math among at-risk children. Efforts to create effective schools often encompass this model (Brophy and Good 1986). Levin (1988) argues — counterintuitively — that at-risk students need a faster-paced and high-interest curriculum, noting that a slow pace often means excessive repetition leading to neglect of higher-order and more vital conceptual, analytic, and problem-solving skills.

Engaged learning: Instructional strategies that link classroom experience with life experience help at-risk students develop higher-order thinking skills. A clear, explicit linkage of student activities with the experience of success may be crucial for students who lack intrinsic motivation or a prior commitment to school (McDill, Natriello and Pallas 1986).

Cooperative learning: Research shows that you can help students master, retain, and transfer concepts by organizing classroom activities so that students have a stake in each other's success (Johnson and Johnson 1978). This approach appears to be far more effective than more individualistic or competitive strategies, by giving students a stake in each other's success. Researchers examining the outcomes of cooperative learning groups have documented "social, personal, and academic gains for learners of all ages."

noting also that students working together toward shared goals are more likely to become accepting of their differences (***Harvard Education Letter*** 1989). Black and Hispanic children appear to learn particularly well in cooperative groups, suggesting that cooperative learning approaches are particularly appropriate in urban centers like New York City (***Harvard Education Letter*** 1989; Armstrong et al. 1977, cited in Johnson and Johnson 1978).

Community Involvement: The more schools extend their reach into the community, the more successful they will be with at-risk students (Comer, Hawley and Rosenholtz 1984; Epstein 1987 and Cummins 1986). "The Time for Assertive Action: School Strategies for Promoting the Educational Success of At-Risk Students," issued last year by the New York State Education Commissioner's Task Force on Education of Children and Youth At-Risk, reflected a greater recognition of the need for resources to fund school-community linkages.

Conclusion

Among the pressing challenges faced by "at-risk" educators, two appear to be most urgent: bridging the experience gap between the home and the school, and capturing students' attention in a world where diversions are both available and compelling.

Reaching these goals may mean suspending business as usual: rooting out strategies that don't work, no matter how strongly established they are in a school district's curriculum or funding structure, and identifying effective interventions.

Many current approaches, such as traditional compensatory programs, retention, pullout models, or the use of in-class aides, appear to have but limited or temporary impact. Other strategies are more promising: for example, reducing class size in early grades (and training teachers to take advantage of small classes) and other early childhood interventions have proven effective.

Successful programs for at-risk students are planned and implemented at the school level by the school professionals and parents who know the students best. They are comprehensive efforts, undergirded by strong staff development efforts, giving teachers considerable flexibility, and making use of active teaching and learning strategies, as well as cooperative learning. They stress higher-order skills, and allow intensive (ideally one-to-one) interventions. They build a cohesive social unit, and extend their reach into the community.

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RESOURCES FOR EDUCATORS

Sharing Successful Programs: Validated At-Risk Youth Programs. A variety of effective models can be obtained from the **New York State Sharing Success Regional Facilitators.** In New York City, call Dr. Lester Young at (212) 488-6619. Outside of New York City, information is available through the **New York State BOCES Network** as well as many larger city school system offices. Or, contact Laurie Rowe at the **New York State Department of Education, Office of Federal Demonstration Projects** at (518) 474-2380.

The Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands makes research findings available to the education community and conducts research and development projects that meet practitioners' needs. Of particular interest is the **Regional Laboratory's SPARK** project and its **Northeast At-Risk Youth Network.** The **SPARK** project is working to create and evaluate programs and processes to increase school success for at-risk youth. For information on publications, seminars, conferences, and training, contact the **Laboratory** at (508) 470-0098 or (508) 470-1080.

The New York City Board of Education's Office of Professional Development & Leadership Training offers school improvement planning and other technical assistance. For information, contact Yvette Jackson at 131 Livingston St., Brooklyn, New York 11217. Her telephone is (718) 935-4259.

RESEARCH BRIEF #3

June, 1990

New York City Public Schools

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